

## STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AT THE ACADEMIC LEVEL. CASE STUDY: THE FACULTY OF ADMINISTRATION AND BUSINESS, UNIVERSITY OF BUCHAREST

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### Abstract

During the last decades, the social responsibility of institutions, public as well as private, has been subject to intense debates, activities and academic research. The aims of the paper are to highlight in short the importance of the social responsibility of institutions, and to analyze the results of a research regarding students' perceptions on corporate social responsibility activities of a Romanian university. By using primary data obtained from a survey based on a questionnaire a set of three hypotheses was tested during our research. The information was processed by using the SPSS software. The results of our research emphasize that students attach importance to the corporate social responsibility at academic level, a fact indicated through their involvement degree in the specific activities of this concept.

**Keywords:** social responsibility, corporate social responsibility, students, university

**JEL Classification:** M14

### Introduction

The social responsibility concept has emerged because of involving/engaging the civil society organizations, corporations and states all over the world in the community problems. During the last decades, the social responsibility of institutions, public as well as private, has been subject to intense debates, activities and academic research. There are numerous ways researchers and scholars conceptualize the corporate social responsibility (CSR). In principle, CSR refers to three main types of responsibilities that an organization has to fulfil: economic, social and environmental (Elkington, 1997).

Higher education institutions in general and universities in particular, have undergone in-depth transformations in the last decades, affecting and being affected by socio-demographical, political and economic phenomena. As higher education has become a highly competitive "mature industry" and a diversified sector, it was necessary for universities to reinvent themselves in response to new challenges and opportunities. Today's strong universities stand out by their ability to follow their vision and to preserve

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their identity even amid significant shifts on the global higher education market (e.g., the increased internationalisation, the marketisation and deregulation of universities). Moreover, the presence of many stakeholders and the application of theories and concepts that have been successful in the business world in an effort to gain a larger share of this market have clearly demonstrated that universities behave more and more as entrepreneurial universities in the current knowledge economy (Ramachandran, 2010; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2010; Petruzzellis and Romanazzi, 2010). The growing concern of nowadays universities to satisfy the needs of different stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, employees, public and private companies, society) and to deal with a profound ecological and social disruption has imposed them a greater social responsibility (Kunstler, 2006).

At the turn of the twenty-first century, universities cannot ignore governments and corporations (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). Firstly, "the government induces universities to act according to the public interest" (Bok, 1982, pp. 47-48). Secondly, universities have a crucial role to play in optimizing the way society is managed, in attaining the objective of ensuring major improvements in people's lives. On the other hand, universities have become increasingly active in identifying know how and its transfer towards individuals and corporations (Bok, 2003, p. VII).

Being in the service to great ideals and advocating civic engagement universities have to promote learning outcomes that go beyond discipline-specific knowledge and to produce good citizens who are trained for both competency and character (Wilhite and Silver, 2005; Ehrlich, 2000). Universities are not only educational services providers, but also shapers of identity with major responsibilities to the nation and to the wider world (Sullivan, 2003). As universities are facing some of the challenges corporations face, they both struggle for funds, good employees, reputation etc. In order to respond better to societal demands universities can learn from the corporate experience. This is why "corporate models and managerialism are a part of emerging definitions of academic work" (Hammond and Churchman, 2008, p. 237).

In essence, corporations are both economic organizations and social institutions (Drucker, 1972). Therefore, they have social responsibilities (SR) as universities have. A corporate social orientation requires ethical and social commitments, connections with stakeholders and consistency of behaviour on a long term (Meehan, Meehan and Richards, 2006). For example, if a university decides to be more responsible and connected with the society, it must be prepared to create, develop and implement a successful social responsibility strategy.

The third millenium university has to be "a place where people are taught to engage as critical and conscientious citizens" (Hinchcliff, 2006, p. 83). In this respect "social responsibility is in ever greater demand, not only from large and multinational companies, but other organizations such as governmental agencies, universities and research centres" (Canibano and Paloma Sanchez, 2009, p. 96).

Although there are studies investigating the impact of social responsibility on corporations, relatively few studies examine this issue in relation to public institutions, especially in universities. From our standpoint students' perceptions regarding SR constitutes an important research field. Several studies have been conducted in the world on this theme (Panwar, Hansen and Anderson, 2010; Sobczak, Debucquet and Havard, 2006) but they did

not focus on investigating students' view about SR activities of a higher education institution. Arising from the above ideas two interrelated questions emerge for which we do not have adequate evidence yet in the Romanian universities. These are:

- How are the SR activities of a Romanian university perceived by its students?
- Which is the impact of the SR activities of a Romanian university among its students?

In order to obtain data for these questions the methodological approach was based on a sociological survey (Rotaru and Ilut, 2006).

The aims of our paper are to highlight in short the importance of the social responsibility of institutions, and to analyze the results of a research regarding students' perceptions on SR activities of a Romanian university. To such end, by using primary data obtained from a survey based on a questionnaire, a set of three hypotheses was tested during our research. The first part of the paper is dealing in details with the research methodology. The findings are analysed and interpreted in the second part, which relate to the main questions that have driven our study. This is followed by conclusions.

## 1. Research methodology

The purpose of our paper is to determine the actual level of knowledge and application of practical methods specific to the concept of CSR by the students of the Faculty of Administration and Business (FAB) within the FAB and the University of Bucharest (UB). The objectives of the study are:

### *A. Identifying the degree of knowledge of the main components of the CSR concept among the FAB students within the UB*

- Evaluating the method in which the FAB students are acquainted with the regulations regarding the environment policy within the UB;
- Identifying the knowledge degree in respect with the procedures and regulations regarding the quality and honesty of the contracts between the UB and the FAB students;
- Measuring the FAB students' perception related to the openness towards community which is promoted by the UB;
- The students' perception of the values promoted by the FAB and UB;
- The students' knowledge level of the strategy and periodical references on the activities specific to the CSR developed by the UB;

### *B. Impact on students' social responsibility activities carried out within the UB community*

- The contribution of students in the CSR activities developed by the FAB and UB;
- Quantifying the influence that the activities specific to the CSR and developed by the FAB and UB have on students.

Based on the above-mentioned objectives the authors formulated the following set of hypotheses:

- The higher the level of knowledge over the FAB/UB's CSR strategy among students, the higher their participation in the specific activities;
- The higher the level of knowledge over the CSR activities developed on an institutional level, the more numerous the students' improvement suggestions on the FAB/UB's overall activity;
- The more the FAB/UB satisfied on a higher level the needs/requests of the interested parties, the more increased was the students' trust in the FAB/UB's services.

In the research process, we carried out a sociological survey based on a questionnaire. A survey was passed among the students of the FAB within the UB. The sampling system consists of the students of the FAB of UB (1154 students). The sample volume comprised 400 respondents, students of FAB, daily courses. (Table no. 1) The sample is representative on the level of the FAB of UB with a maximum error of  $\pm 5\%$  for a confidence level of 95%. The established sample is probabilistic, in three stages and with stratification in the first stage in accordance to the section in which the student is registered. In the second stage, stratification was applied in relation to the year of study. In the last stage, we used a random selection of the subjects that will be interviewed through the "statistical method".

In order to validate/invalidate the research's hypotheses the authors structured the questionnaire on the following domains specific to the CSR: environment (6 questions), marketing (9 questions), community relations (3 questions), institutional values (7 questions) of UB, publication/reporting of the institution's activity (9 questions).

**Table no.1: Distribution on sections and years of study  
of the surveys created during the field research**

Year of study at FAB	Specialization			
	Public Administration	Business Administration	Marketing	Total of interviews
I	59	68	40	167
II	66	46	0	112
III	51	70	0	121
Total	176	184	40	400

The interviews were carried out through self-report at the FAB's headquarters, in a specially arranged space, using a standardized questionnaire, in the period 05.12-06.02.2010.

The questionnaire was elaborated by the authors and tested on a number of 20 subjects. The questionnaire was established after the pilot study was made. During the pre-test, the average duration of an interview was of 15 minutes.

The pilot study consisted of elements such as: 1) the validity of the questionnaire questions (i.e. the measure in which they quantify what they propose to evaluate); 2) the questions' methodological correctness (i.e. are they exhaustive and mutually exclusive response options for the questions); 3) formulating the questions (i.e. the manner in which they were understood by the study subjects; with intelligibility, accessibility); 4) the duration of carrying out an interview.

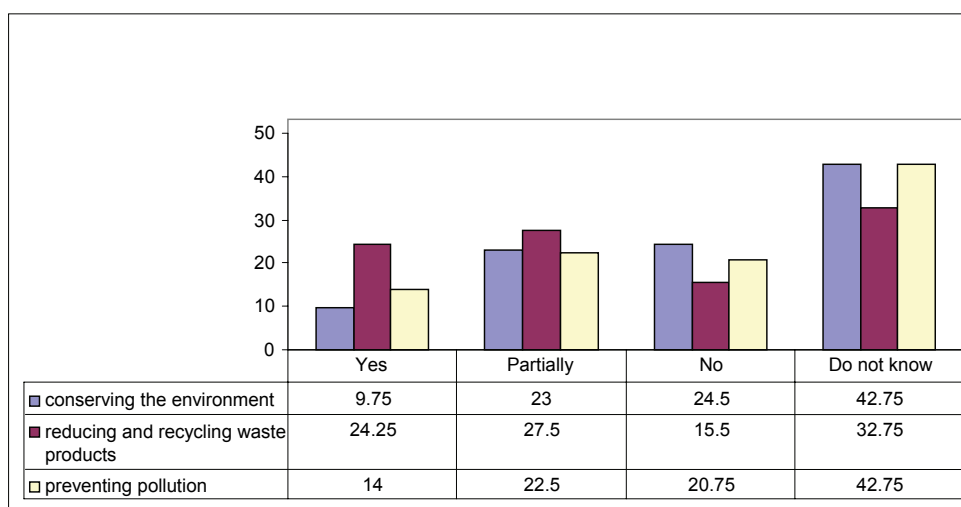
The authors performed a check on the questionnaire after retrieving it from the study subject, verifying the entire completion of the surveys, the intelligibility and coherence of the answers. The questionnaires were introduced in a database and a syntax of labeling the variables and response codes was created.

## 2. Data processing and interpretation

The information gathered was processed by using the SPSS software. Within each domain there was pursued to achieve students' knowledge over the specific CSR activities and their level of involvement, as follows:

- *Knowledge level of the supplementary measures and actions carried out with the purpose of reducing the impact of the FAB/UB's activities on the environment.*

A significantly low level of knowledge over additional actions carried out by the UB for conserving the environment can be noticed. A higher visibility (52 %) has also had the measures and activities towards reducing and recycling waste products. (Figure no. 1)



**Figure no. 1: Level of knowledge of the additional measures that can lead to mitigating the impact of UB's activities over the environment (%)**

The students who notice additional measures in reducing and recycling waste are mainly those that appreciate the voluntarism participation of the FAB/UB under different aspects in projects for the environment's protection and that it offers clear information about the products and services provided. (Table no. 2)

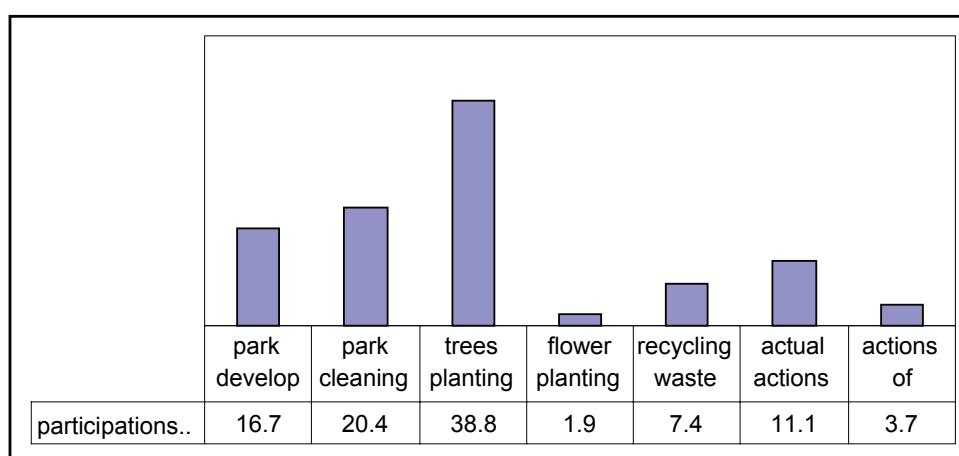
**Table no. 2: Knowledge level of the FAB/UB's voluntary participation in actions for environment protection**

Variants	Relative frequency (%)
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Yes	22,3
No	6,5
Do not know	71,2
Total	100

It can be observed that 22.3% of the FAB students know that FAB/UB voluntary participates in actions for the protection of the environment. The very high percentage of those who cannot answer this question reveals a reduced level of information among students about this sort of approach. It results that there are communication deficiencies in both ways. On one hand, the institution does not always provide complete information regarding the projects for environment protection (even when plans exist). On the other hand, in some situations the groups of students present indolence towards their implication in this sort of activities.

It can be observed that 54 students have indicated concrete actions towards environment protection. (Figure no. 2) Planting trees, followed by cleaning and developing parks represented most of the actions carried out.



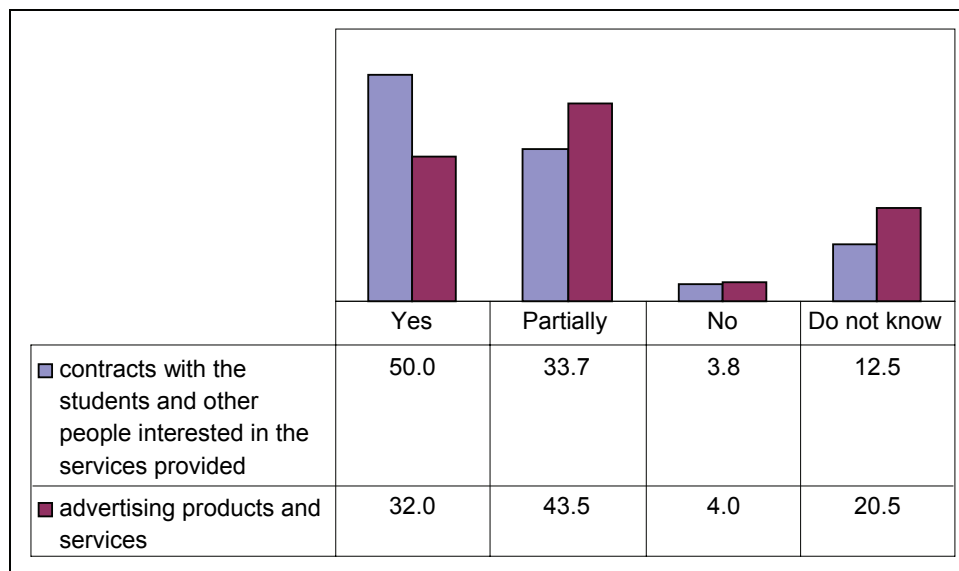
**Figure no. 2: Share of types of environmental protection actions carried out by FAB/UB, according to the opinion of the questioned students (%)**

In conclusion, the actions and measures fulfilled towards protecting the environment captured the attention of a well-structured group with clear preoccupations in this domain, stakeholders in the activities that FAB/UB completes in relation to the employees, the students and the business environment.

- *Knowledge degree of the additional measures and actions fulfilled by the FAB/UB in order to assure honesty and quality of procedures towards stakeholders.*

Regarding contracts with students and stakeholders, half of the respondents said that before signing those the respondents were clearly informed in detail about all rights and obligations. (Figure no. 3) They have remarked that the quality of the studies is largely guaranteed through the faculty teachers (competent, connected to the labor market realities), the contracts are detailed and most of the requests have been solved on time.

Thirty two percent of the students believe that UB has procedures that guarantee the honesty and quality of advertisement for products and services. The said underlined the transparency of the selection processes regarding abroad educational programs, as well as for professional training workshops, labor mediation services, the correct appreciation of the students' activity, the diversity of social services, of professional groups and university fairs.



**Figure no. 3: Students' perceptions related to the honesty and quality of procedures of FAB/UB**

Therefore, an optimum rapport has to be between the image of FAB/UB products and services, and their content whereas there are situations in which the content of some programs is substantial but the presentation requires improvements.

An important chapter of CSR activity is represented by FAB/UB's concern for fulfilling and improving the services provided. A measurement was made about the students' perception of fulfilling the discounts calendar regarding the amounts paid by the students registered on the public scholarships allocated under the budget of the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports, over the procedures through which a consultation or a dialogue is assured for the students regarding the quality of their courses and seminars and registering and solving filed complaints.

Regarding the compliance of discounts regarding the passes for the students registered on the public scholarships allocated under the budget of the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and sports, 63% of the students affirmed they were always fulfilled, while 32% noticed that there were situations when the deadline was exceeded. Only 0,5% of the interviewed students considered that deadlines for discounts were never fulfilled. (Table no. 3)

**Table no. 3: The distribution of answers regarding the way how FAB/UB ensures on time reimbursement of passes towards the students**

Answers	Relative frequency (%)
Yes, always	63.2
Sometimes, it exceeds the deadline	32.0
They never pay on time	0.5
Do not know	4.3
Total	100.0

Concerning the procedures that assure consultation/dialogue regarding the quality of courses and seminars, 74% of the students affirm the existence of such procedures. (Table no. 4) It is interesting to notice the lack of a significant statistical association between affirming the existence of consultation procedures regarding the quality of courses and seminars and the section, year of study, gender and the residential area from which the students originate. These procedures indicate, in the students' opinion, the interest shown for their training, for a dialogue and creating a climate of trust between the two parts involved in the educational process.

**Table no. 4: The distribution of the answers regarding the way how FAB/UB makes use of procedures, rules through it ensures a consultation/dialogue regarding the quality of courses and seminars with the students**

Answers	Relative frequency (%)
Yes	74.0
No	22.5
Do not know	3.5
Total	100.0

On the topic of registering and solving complaints made by students, about 29% of them did not experience any problems. (Table no. 5) Only 11% of the students are, in a certain degree, not satisfied with this component of the faculty-students relationship.

**Table no. 5: Distribution of the answers regarding the perception over the way how FAB/UB registers and solves students' complaints**

Answers	Relative frequency (%)
Yes, always	13.0
Sometimes yes, sometimes no	46.7
Rarely or very rare	8.3
Not at all	2.8
Do not know	29.2
Total	100.0

In this analyzed aspect, no significant statistical association (adjusted residual value under 2 on a 95% trust level) can be noticed of the variables specialization, year of study, gender and residential environment of the student. In the students' opinion solving the complaints that the institution receives leads to improving confidence in the educational process, assures transparency and creates a proper climate for the activities to be properly carried out. We must also mention that solving the students' complaints indicates the importance awarded to them by the institution's leaders.



In the case of FAB/UB's cooperation with other companies or organizations in solving aspects related to responsible educational activity, it can be observed that 3% of the respondents affirm that the institution does not look for external support. (Table no. 6) The answers to this question are not influenced by variables such as specialization, year of study, gender and residential environment, however such are directly proportional with the degree in which clear and exact information on its products, services and activities are provided to students, suppliers and the local community.

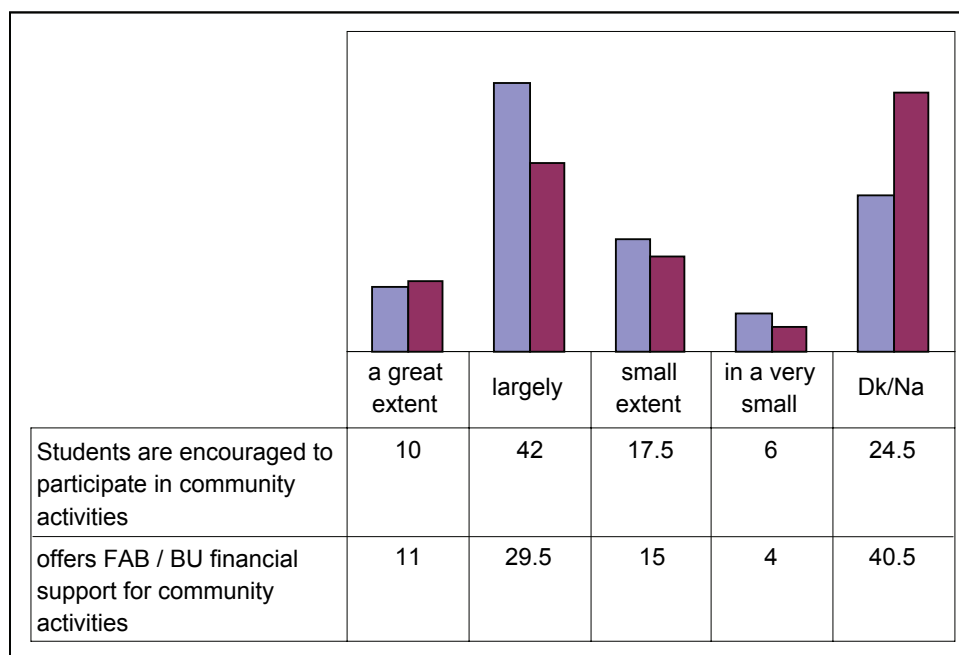
**Table no. 6: The distribution of answers regarding the perception over the cooperation FAB/UB with other companies or organizations in solving the issues related to the responsible educational activity**

Answers	Relative frequency (%)
Yes	61.1
Partially	35.9
No	3.0
Total options	100

The answers to said question are not influenced by variables such as specialization, year of study, gender and residential environment, but are directly proportional with the level of delivery to students, suppliers, and local communities of clear and exact information over its products, services and activities.

- *Degree of knowledge of the additional measures and actions carried out by FAB/UB with the aim of opening towards the community.*

The interviewed students know the dimension of the communitarian activity developed by FAB/UB in a high degree. (Figure no. 4) From those that answered about the community implication aspects of FAB/UB, 80% affirm that the faculty offers opportunities to community members. Sixty-eight percent sustain that the institution supports in a high and very high measure different activities (such as donations, acts of charity or sponsorship) and encourages students' participation in activities.

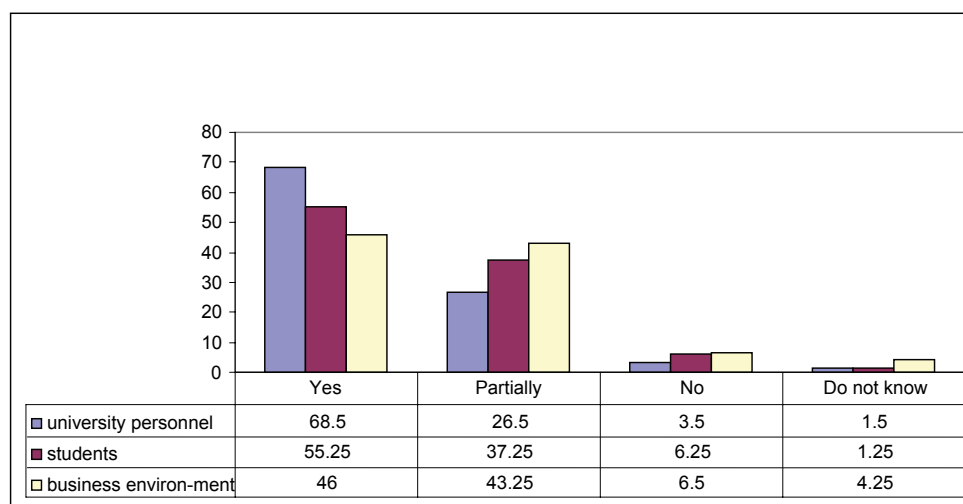


**Figure no. 4: The degree of involvement from FAB/UB and its students in the life of community (%)**

- Degree of knowledge of the additional measures and actions carried out by FAB/UB and aiming knowledge of the values that define its internal and external relationships.

In the widest area the concept of value expresses a set of general and abstract principles about what is important and cherished in life, about how people should behave and appreciate situations, events, people, as well as social and natural objects.

Those who believe that the values are clearly defined within the institution in relation with the stakeholders represent approximately 89-94% of the interviewed subjects. The students consider that the best-regulated situation is the one in accordance to its employees and then with them and the business environment. (Figure no. 5) In view of the correlation between the main considered demographical and social features (gender, year of study, specialization, and residential environment) and the three addressability segments (university staff, students and the business environment), it can be noticed that only the gender feature influences the answers to the questions in the questionnaire. Thus, the students of masculine gender tend more to consider that the values are not clearly defined regarding the university staff while they cannot make any statements in respect with said aspects in the case of students and the business environment.



**Figure no. 5: The degree in which FAB/UB has clearly defined values in relation with the stakeholders (%)**

- *The benefits provided by the additional actions carried out by the FAB/UB in order to increase the confidence and communication with stakeholders.*

In the opinion of the FAB students, the benefits of the information/communication activity are the improvement of the institution's reputation/prestige, an increased satisfaction level among the employees and students, better relationships with the local community and public authority.

The level of satisfaction of the students is also significantly influenced by the CSR strategy of the FAB/UB. The level of the students' expectancy regarding the activities fulfilled by the FAB/UB in the CSR is high: 49% of the subjects appreciate these performances as being good and very good. Approximately 41% of the students await a better-sustained activity by the institution related to CSR. (Table no. 7)

**Table no. 7: Degree of appreciation of the FAB/UB's achievements in the CSR domain**

Level of appreciation	Relative frequency (%)
Very good	8.1
good	41.0
So so	41.4
bad	4.1
Very bad	0.3
Do not know	5.1
Total	100.0

## **Conclusions**

Social responsibility in the higher education sector is not so different from the corporate social responsibility. Both universities and corporations have to provide sound responses to new realities of environment and society. The primary role of universities is to serve the society within its functions. The results of our research emphasize that students attach importance to the CSR at academic level, a fact indicated through their involvement degree in the specific activities of this concept.

It can be differentiated within the sample a group that is interested in the CSR activity carried out by FAB/UB. It is a group with a variable dimension, according to the CSR domain. Themes about environment and community involvement capture the attention of 35-55 % of the students. A higher impact over the students is given by the concern for the values of FAB/UB, which raise the interest of 55-60 % of the questioned students. The best-appreciated values of UB by the students are the development of the team spirit, concern for the quality of the activity carried out and the encouragement of personal initiatives. The concern for continuous improvement of the products/services provided by the FAB/UB is known by 75-85 % of the students.

Marketing activity is coherent as a message and actions; thus, it is more probable that those who are interested in regulations that guarantee honesty to be more interested in the quality of the contracts with students and third parties, in the quality of the supplied information and the feedback of educational activities and measures for improving such. As regards the activity for informing/publication of the CSR reports, we can assert that students who state that information leads to a higher satisfaction of the employees are mainly those who state that UB publishes yearly CSR reports.

The research has validated initial hypotheses. It has been noticed that the wider was spread the informing on the programs and actions of FAB/UB, the higher their involvement. Students have involved in all specific SR areas: environment, honesty and quality assurance in relation with the beneficiaries of provided services, the relation with the community. Thus, as regards the environmental protection actions, students took part to actions for trees planting, parks fitting and cleaning, or waste recycling. Actions have also mentioned aimed at helping those in need: disabled children, needy people. In the area of procedures honesty and quality assurance, there has been noticed the students' involvement in professional training workshops, labour mediation services, professional groups and university fairs.

As regards the relationship between FAB/UB and the community it is most likely that those who are informed of the provided opportunities to take part in community activities.,

The hypothesis analysing the relationship between the knowledge over the carried out SR activities and the improvement suggestions from students is also validated by the data provided by the questionnaire-based research. Thus, the students' suggestions actually referred to all measured SR aspects; in the environmental policy the need for diversifying the environment actions was stressed in actions such as "Andrei's Country", the increased efficiency of recycling and environmental protection actions. Other suggestions referred to increasing details and explanations over the contractual details in relation with students (scholarships, schedule, passes' reimbursements), for improving the dialogue with students on subjects such as classes' or seminars' quality. Proposals regarding the improvement of FAB/UB activity can be drawn from the hierarchy set down by the questioned students referring to the values of FAB/UB: development of team spirit, encouragement and

development of personal initiatives, efficacy in communication and creativity in relation with employees and students.

The third hypothesis also – the relationship between the satisfaction over the provided services and the level of trust in FAB/UB is validated. The level of trust in FAB/UB is directly proportional with the satisfaction of the needs/demands of the students for concrete problems: passes' reimbursement, scholarships payment, providing social services, solving complaints. To such end there is also mentioned the fact that students (66% of the interviewed students) believe that the SR activity carried out by UB is part of a clear strategy and the appreciation over the obtained performances.

Our research, limited as it is by its purpose and its sample size, represents a starting point for the study of the students' perceptions about CSR of the Romanian universities. Findings from this study can constitute work hypothesis for researching on bigger samples from different universities.

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